

Vending—Pros and Cons

Vending has received a large amount of press in recent years. An increasing number of school districts—and even some states—are outlawing vending or severely limiting the choice of items available to students. Generally the movement is to not have any vending available in elementary schools and limited vending at upper grades. Worksites and community buildings are also changing in their vending to promote healthier weight.

These changes are being made to help curb the increasing problem of obesity. In South Dakota approximately one third of students are at risk of being overweight or already overweight and approximately two thirds of adults are overweight or obese.

If vending is available, there should be policies about when the machines can be “on”. Some schools will require that all vending operations, both inside and outside of the cafeteria, be made unavailable during regular school meal periods. Or perhaps the vending policy will only have healthy options available during the meal periods.

While vending does provide a significant amount of discretionary income for administrators, schools who have improved their vending by providing healthy choices have not seen a decrease in sales. When kids and adults are thirsty or hungry, they want to eat but need to have options for healthy snacks and beverages. Having healthy options available makes healthy eating an easier choice.

Access to Healthy Vending Options

As a way to decrease overweight and obesity, many schools, worksites, and communities are improving their vending. A few schools have eliminated vending while others are providing healthy choices as the only options or as a percentage of the foods available, i.e., half the foods or beverages must be “healthy”.

Access to healthy choices can either be accomplished by the choices by machine or the number of machines available. For example, a building could limit the number of machines that provide the less healthy choices. The location of the machines should also be considered. Place water machines strategically in high traffic areas for easier access by users.

Be sure to consider pricing of the products available. You want the healthy options to be as appealing in cost as any less healthy options to make healthy eating the easier choice. For example, North Community High School (MN), priced water at \$.75, sport drinks and 100% fruit or vegetable juices at \$1.00 and soda and fruit drinks (e.g., Fruitopia) at \$1.25. Students know prices and where they can obtain the same or similar products. Before raising prices, be aware of the prices of other places similar products can be obtained such as any allowed student sales or local convenience stores.

Another way to encourage healthier options was to allow students or workers to drink water in the classroom or work station but not other beverages.

Making Vending of Beverages Healthy

Beverages are often the easiest place to start as healthier products are readily available. Instead of sweetened carbonated beverages (soda pop), the healthiest choices would be milk, any flavor and preferably non-fat or low fat (1%), fruit or vegetable juice that contains at least 50% juice, and pure water. Healthier options may be flavored or vitamin-enhanced fitness water, sparkling water, low-calorie, diet soda pop, low-cal iced tea, or low-cal coffee. Regular soft drinks and sport drinks should be excluded.

Vending of milk sometimes calls for creativity if the milk does not have an extended shelf life. Machines for milk products may be limited. Stock must be rotated and checked for expiration date. One SD school has milk in a refrigerator that is stocked by the student council and the payment is on the honor code. They have not lost money on this effort and have provided a healthier choice for students of a needed nutrient—calcium.

Making the Vending of Snacks Healthier

As vending options are improved, providing healthy snacks requires more effort than beverages due the foods that are traditionally available. But it can be done.

While fruits and vegetables make wonderful snacks, fresh products are difficult in vending machines. Discuss options with your vending wholesaler. Have you ever seen an apple packed to drop from a machine?

The Healthy Vending Initiative for Bexar County, Texas, Community Health Collaborative (San Antonio) provided these guidelines of suggested snacks for vending and not just in schools:

Healthiest	Healthier	Excluded
Animal crackers, graham crackers	Granola bars, whole-grain fruit bars	Cookies (including lowfat), candy, candy bars, chocolate bars, toaster pastries, marshmallow/cereal treats
	Baked chips, corn nuts, rice cakes, cereal/nut mix	Regular chips, cheese-flavored crackers, cracker sandwiches
Nuts and seeds—plain or with spices	Nuts with light sugar covering; honey-roasted	Candy- or yogurt-coated nuts
Trail mix—plain	Popcorn/nut mix	Trail mix with chocolate
Fresh, canned or individually packed fruit—light syrup or natural juices only		Canned or aseptic-packed fruit in heavy syrup
Dried fruit—raisins, dried cranberries; fruit leather	Fruit-flavored snacks	Candy- or sugar-coated dried fruit

	Pretzels—any flavor	Candy- or yogurt-coated pretzels
Fat-free popcorn	Light popcorn movie style	Popcorn—butter, butter lovers
Beef jerky—95% fat free		Sausages, pork rinds
Yogurt, preferably non-fat, low-fat or light		

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